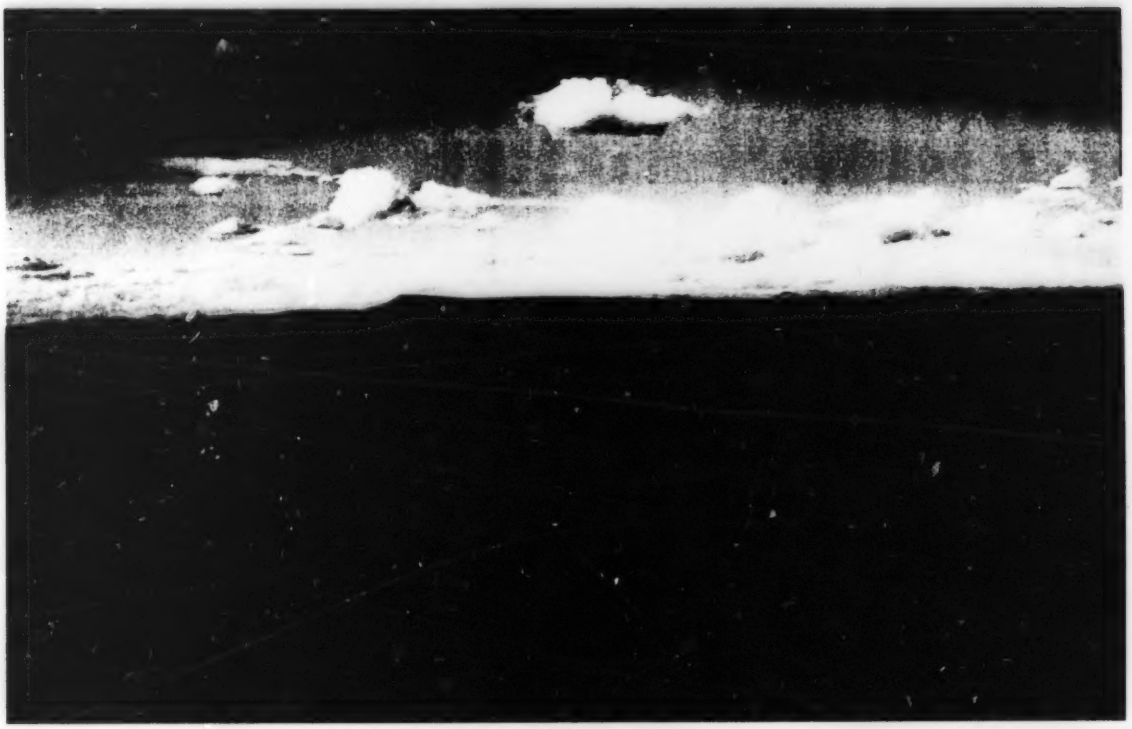
*February 2002*

# YUKON PROTECTED AREAS STRATEGY

*Area of Interest for*

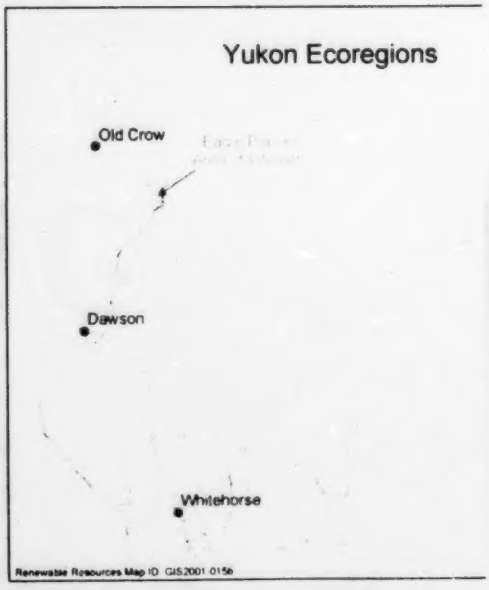
# EAGLE PLAINS ECOREGION



Mount Joyal, one of the highest points of the Eagle Plains, overlooks the gently rolling terrain and low wetlands which make up the ecoregion. At 20,500 square kilometers, the ecoregion totals about four per cent of the Yukon.

Eagle Plains was largely unglaciated in the last ice age and makes up a part of the Yukon landscape known as *Beringia*.

The Eagle Plains Ecoregion (figure 1) lies in northeast Yukon along the Arctic Circle, where temperatures range from –60C to +30C. This ecoregion is an important part of the fall and winter migration of the barren-ground Porcupine Caribou Herd.




(figure 1)

Yukon Government

## The First Step –the Area of Interest

Selecting an "area of interest" is the first step in the YPAS process of establishing a Goal 1 protected area.

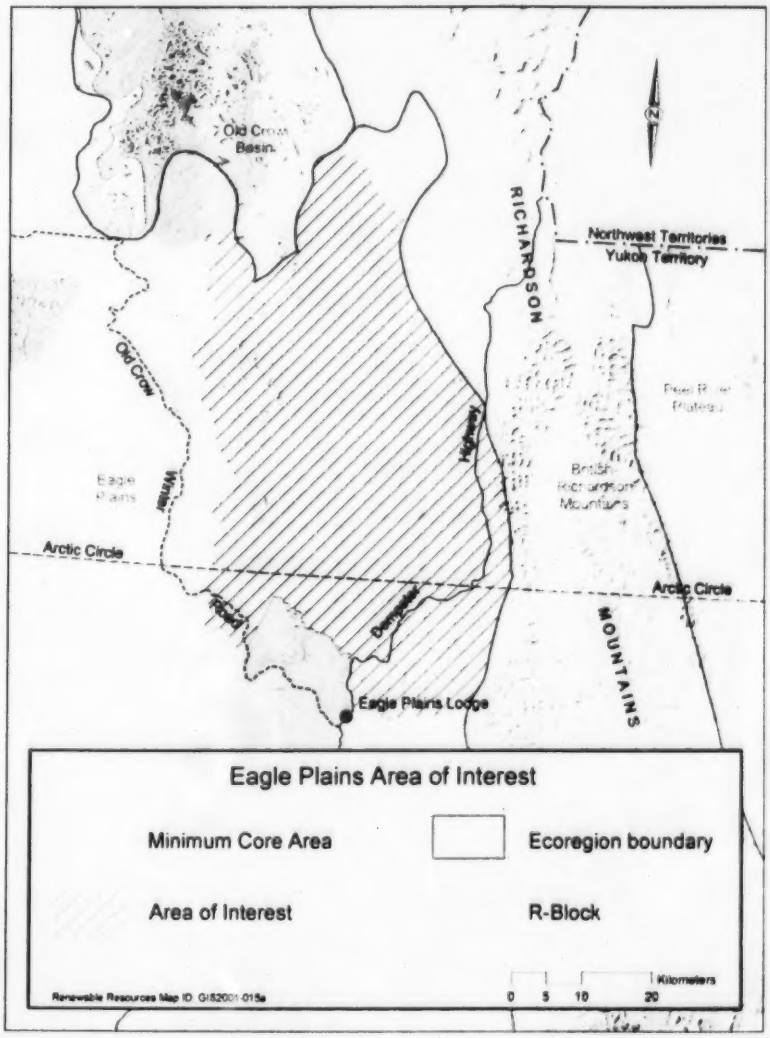
The Eagle Plains area of interest (figure 2) covers 2422 km² (11.8.% of the Eagle Plains ecoregion). Its boundaries largely follow the ecoregion boundary on the east and north, the height of land between the Eagle River and Schaeffer Creek on the west, and the Vuntut Gwitchin settlement land on the south. The Dempster Highway runs along and through the area of interest for 60.4 km, starting at the Eagle River just north of the Eagle Plains Lodge.

The area of interest includes a "minimum core area," the minimum that satisfies representativeness and ecological viability.

The lakes, rivers and wetlands provide good fish habitat and nesting and moulting sites for a wide variety of migratory waterfowl. Habitat for birds of prey in the area include bald eagle and osprey nesting sites. Part of the customary fall migration corridor of the Porcupine Caribou Herd lies within the area. Other wildlife found in the area include grizzly and black bear, wolf, red fox, ptarmigan, Swainson's thrush, and ruby-crowned kinglet.

It offers excellent opportunities to study the unusual "Beringian floral assemblage", the wide variety of woodland and tundra plants and flowers growing over the permafrost in summer.

This area is an important area for researchers, such as geologists, archaeologists and entomologists, who are interested in the unique landscapes found here and the flora and fauna supported by it.




(figure 2)

## The Next Step – the Planning Team

A well-balanced planning team will be appointed by Cabinet to implement the YPAS public process. The team will hold public meetings, seek input from stakeholder groups, local residents and the general public, and then recommend the final boundaries of the Goal 1 protected area, within the area of interest, and its purpose and management principles. Cabinet will then review and make a decision on the team's recommendations.

Representatives from the affected First Nations, Renewable Resource Council, and communities will be invited to join the team, as well as Yukon government representatives and individuals with various backgrounds.

# Eagle Plains Ecoregion

## Ecology

The ecoregion has a cold climate with extensive permafrost. This creates a subarctic environment that supports primarily black spruce woodlands, with black spruce-tussock tundra on lower slopes, shrub tundra at high elevations, and tussock tundra on level and gently sloping surfaces. Paper birch follow large fires typical of the area.

While this area was largely unglaciated in the last ice age, glaciers beyond this ecoregion influenced many of the major rivers and tributaries of the ecoregion. Rivers, like the Eagle, flow through old channels that cut through rock to drain ancient glacial waters from the Mackenzie Mountains.

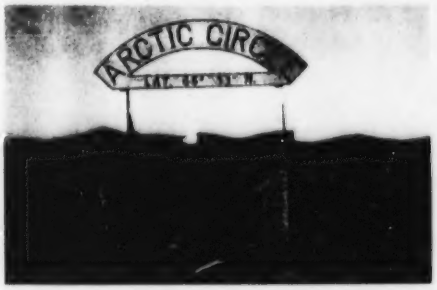
## The Porcupine Caribou Herd

The Eagle Plains Ecoregion is a significant fall migration route of the barren-ground Porcupine Caribou Herd. They may also be seen overwintering in the area.

Caribou hunting along the migration route is an ancient tradition, and many archaeological and cultural sites have been found, primarily in the Richardson foothills just east of the ecoregion. Fall hunting is a major recreation and subsistence activity today.

## Dempster Highway

The Dempster Highway is a well known all-season road of considerable tourist and commercial importance. It is the only Canadian Highway that crosses the Arctic Circle. Although the Dempster corridor will not be part of the final Goal 1 protected area, it offers visitors attractive viewscapes, wildlife viewing, and opportunities to appreciate the protected area and other important values of the ecoregion. Eagle Plains Lodge and Rock River campground offer nearby facilities.




## Wilderness Recreational Opportunities

There is good wilderness hiking in the Richardson foothills adjacent to the ecoregion, with potential for day and multi-day hikes.

The Eagle and Porcupine Rivers offer wilderness canoeing opportunities. The Vuntut Gwitchin have long used the rivers for hunting and travel between seasonal sites, including Old Crow.

## Existing Managed Areas

Cody Creek, part of the Fishing Branch Ecological Reserve, covers 647 km$^2$ of the ecoregion. It was included primarily for the protection of grizzly bears. Its contribution to ecoregion representation was taken into account.

There are settlement lands and site specific selections of several First Nations in the ecoregion.

# Summary of Assessments for the Area of Interest

## Ecological Values

### representative

The area of interest contains the typical characteristics of the ecoregion : a good portion of the Eagle River drainage basin; the mid-portions of the Eagle River, with old-growth riparian white spruce/balsam forest, very limited at this latitude; and many small lakes.

### ecologically viable

This area at 2422 km$^2$ meets the criterion of ecological viability.

### natural

The area is largely natural. The only significant human disturbance is the Dempster highway. The Old Crow winter access route cuts across the southwest tip of the area of interest for about 10 km, and has left little impact on the landscape.

## Socio-Cultural Values

### cultural / spiritual values

The Porcupine Caribou Herd migration routes are important to the traditional way of life of the First Nations of the area.

### recreational activities

Fall caribou hunting is a major activity. There is also wildlife viewing, canoeing, and fishing.

### heritage significance

The Eagle River has been a well-used access route. It is in a traditional hunting area for several First Nations.

### educational / research potential

Ease of access and relatively little human disturbance makes this an attractive site for wildlife research and educational activities. The Beringian landscape, flora and fauna offer unique research opportunities.

### local impact

There may be local employment opportunities from increased wilderness tourism or development based on the highway. Subsistence activities will continue.

## Economic Values

### tourism

An Eagle Plains protected area and a higher profile for the Arctic Circle crossing will enhance the Dempster Highway's tourism potential. The Beringian landscape has good film potential.

### mineral development

There were no existing claims as of January 1st, 2002 and no known mineral occurrences. A regional mineral assessment shows relatively low potential.

### oil & gas development

There are no existing gas or oil dispositions. There is low oil potential and high to medium gas potential. An estimated seven per cent of the gas potential in the Eagle Plain basin is included in the area of interest.

### access

The Dempster Highway route through the area is a very important access corridor. Its present use, and its potential future use for a pipeline and hydro transmission line, will be respected. The Old Crow winter access route will continue to be available as needed. Provision will be made for land access to the Richardson Mountains to the east.

### forestry

There is no existing use, and a regional forest inventory shows no economic potential.

### renewable energy

There is no existing use, and there are no known potential renewable energy sites. The Dempster is identified as a major potential energy corridor.

### agriculture

There is no existing use, and soil and climate analysis shows no potential.

### commercial fishing

There is no existing use and no potential.

### outfitting

There are no existing concessions impacted.

### trapping

The area of interest is part of the Vuntut Gwitchin Group Trapping Area.

*A binder of detailed maps and resource assessments is available to view in the offices of the departments of Renewable Resources (Parks and Protected Areas) and Economic Development.*